

The Time Traveler News

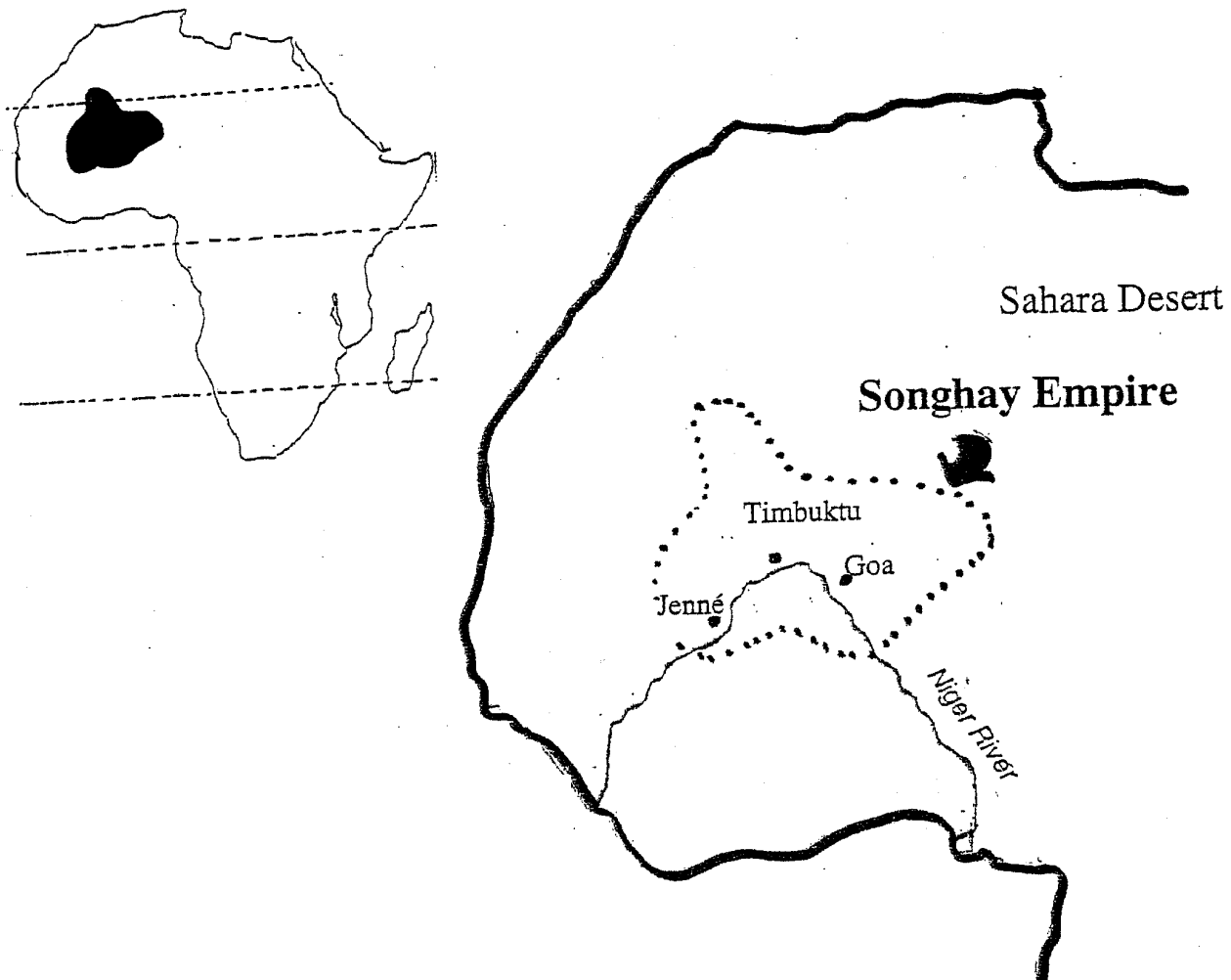
Songhay Empire

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Words in *italics* appear in a glossary at the end of **The Time Traveler News**.

Your destination on this journey back in time is the Songhay *Empire*, located in the continent of Africa. The center of the *empire* is located along the bend of the mighty Niger River in West Africa. (The river is over 2,600 miles long!) It is just south of the enormous Sahara Desert. On this day in 1492, the Songhay *Empire* extends almost to the Atlantic Ocean on the west, into the desert on the north and about 500 miles to the east.



Most of the land along the big bend of the river is flat and dry, with many grasses growing. But in winter, (which is in July in this part of the world,) the rains come, the river floods in places, and the result is *fertile* farmland. As you head south on the eastern part of the Niger, the rainfall increases and so do the kinds of plants. You will find more trees and shrubs. You can travel all the way to the Gulf of Guinea on this part of the Niger River. That's over a thousand miles!

You will find people living in three ways in the Songhay *Empire*. Many people live in cities. Many people live in small villages. The fishermen travel and live along the river, going where the fishing is best.

Timbuktu Is Great Place to Shop, Learn, and Pray

There are three big cities along the Niger (Ni-jur) River. The biggest is Timbuktu, (it's pronounced just like it looks). Jenné (Jen-náy) and Gao are the other two. Let me show you the most important city of the empire, Timbuktu. To get here, you traveled south from the shores of the Mediterranean (Med-it-ur-a-nee-an) Sea, across the Sahara Desert. I hope the camel ride wasn't too bumpy. Timbuktu is a dazzling city, with beautiful buildings and many bustling markets and shops. It is an important center for government, for business, and for learning.

As you walk down the streets you see large buildings for the most important officials, libraries for books and *manuscripts*, and university buildings for learning. The smaller houses you see are for the businessmen and *craftsmen*. These *craftsmen* each have a specialty. Please wander into some of the shops and admire their objects of gold, ivory, leather, cloth, clay, and metal. Some of these are traded to other areas, and some are used right here by the residents of Timbuktu.

The most impressive buildings you see are called *mosques*. *Muslims* use these for worship services and for learning. *Muslims* pray five times a day, so the mosque is a very important place. Most of the people who live in the cities practice this important religion.

Village Life Is Centered on Farming

As we leave Timbuktu, we travel to the countryside where many people live in small villages. They grow grains such as *sorghum* and *millet* and fruits and vegetables such as pumpkins, peanuts, watermelon, and okra. They are excellent farmers and grow enough for their own families as well as enough to sell in the cities. They also tend cattle, sheep, and goats. It is very dry in Songhay, but some farmers have a system of *dikes* and earth *dams* so they can catch the winter rains and make the most of the water they do have. Most of these people are not *Muslims*, but practice traditional religion with a variety of gods and spirits closely related to the natural world around them. This religion emphasizes respect for ancestors. If you stay for a while you may hear some of the stories that are part of the oral tradition.

Fishermen Follow the Catch

The third group of people you find here are fishermen. They travel up and down the Niger River, catching and selling fish. They are *nomads*, following the river and not living in a permanent village.

Builders Use Available Resources

Houses in Songhay use the materials that are available-mud for *adobe* walls, grasses for protective roofs, and timber for larger buildings. These timbers help to

strengthen the *adobe* walls, because *adobe* can crack or buckle. The timbers support the heavy walls. This technology allows architects to design and build very large and very beautiful buildings. Because the weather is very dry and very warm, our houses are generally small and used mainly for sleeping and storage. Notice that people work, eat, play, and do business outside. To feel comfortable in this climate, we wear cloth made from cloth woven from locally grown cotton.

Shop ‘Til You Drop

Songhay is a major trade center. The cities of Timbuktu, Jenné, and Gao are the places to be if you like to shop! Huge *caravans* start out in North Africa at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea laden with horses, jewels, spices, silk, and furs from Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, and Asia. Sometimes they bring trade goods from Spain and Italy. In fact, in Gao, there are tombstones made of Spanish marble, brought here in the 1100’s, over 300 years ago. In exchange, Songhay traders send cotton cloth, honey, koa nuts, leather, livestock, jewelry, pottery, and gold back across the Sahara desert. One of the other things they trade for are slaves. The slave trade has been going on for a long time. Some slaves are captured during wars, others are criminals, and others have done things to displease the rulers. Many of these slaves are forced to carry the trade items across the desert. They get hardly any water or food and are beaten badly. Many die, and those who survive are often sold in Europe as household servants or guards. Unfortunately, there is a lot of money to be made in the slave trade, and I predict that more and more people will be captured and made slaves.

Songhay Excels in Organization and Education

Songhay is a very organized *empire*. There is a large and efficient army to protect the *empire* and to enforce the laws. All trade goods going in and out of Songhay are taxed, and there is an efficient system for collecting these taxes. There are judges and courts to make sure that people live together in peace. Because there is so much trade, we have a great *system of weights and measures* so no one is cheated. If you get sick on your trip, there are excellent doctors in the cities who already have figured out that malaria, a terrible disease, is caused by mosquitoes. They also are very skillful at doing eye surgery. (Of course, our methods may seem very simple compared to your time, but we are very advanced for 1492.)

If you like to learn, you will enjoy your visit to Songhay. You can study *astronomy*, math, music, and medicine at the *universities*. If you like to read, you will find books and *manuscripts* are available. And of course you can read the *Koran*, the holy book of the *Muslims*. All of these things are written in Arabic, the language of the government of Songhay.

Travel in Style

We use boats on the Niger River to get to places. In fact, the army has a whole fleet of boats so that it can move quickly around the country. The army also uses horses to get to all parts of the *empire*. To cross dry areas and the Sahara Desert, the camel is the main means of transportation. As you learned on your trip across the Sahara, this amazing animal has adapted to the environment and can go long distances on very little food and water. Camels are strong enough to carry both people and trade goods. Camels even have two sets of eyelashes to keep the sand

out of their eyes and hooves that help them move easily over the shifting sands of the desert.

You can see that we who live in the Songhay Empire have a lot going for us. Because we mine minerals in the area, we work metals into tools, weapons, sculptures, and jewelry. We know how to make really large and elaborate buildings that last a long time. We value learning and have great places to study. We are excellent businessmen and work hard to have an organized society. We have an army to maintain life within the empire and extend the empire to new areas. The Songhay Empire is truly a wonderful place to be in 1492.

If you would like to learn more about the Songhay Empire, here are some places to look.

Books

The Songhay by David Conrad

Glossary

A guide is included for words that are difficult to pronounce.

adobe (a-doe-be)

mud bricks dried in the sun

astronomy (a-stron-o-me)

the study of the stars, planets and other features of the sky

caravan (pronounce the first a like the a in hat)

a company of travelers and animals on a journey through a desert

craftsmen

workers with excellent skills at a specific trade, such as working with gold, making clay pots, or making metal tools

dam

barrier built across a waterway for saving water or preventing its flow

dike

wall usually of earth constructed to control or confine water

empire

an empire is made up of many smaller areas; the leader of the empire is more powerful than all the other leaders and can conquer their lands and collect taxes and **tribute**

fertile (fur-till)

soil that is good for growing crops

Koran

the holy book of the **Muslims**

manuscript

something written by hand

millet

a grass with small seeds used for cereal and for grazing animals

mosque (mosk)

the place a Muslim goes to worship

Muslim

member of the faith of Islam, a religion that teaches that Allah is the one God

nomad

someone who does not live permanently in a place, but moves throughout an area, usually to find food or conduct business

sorghum (sore-gum)

grass similar to Indian corn

system of weights and measures

way of finding the size or weight of something so that everyone uses the same standard-for example, in our country we use pounds and ounces to weigh and inches and feet to measure

university

place of advanced learning where many subjects are taught